



The Housing Question

Thanks to his book, “[The Condition of the Working Class in England](#)”, Frederick Engels is, among many other things, considered to be the father of modern urban studies and town planning.

Therefore one might approach another of his books, “[The Housing Question](#)” (part of it is attached) expecting answers to that same housing question. One might hope for instructions about what to build. One might expect sermons about “delivery”, or even model house-plans. Instead, one finds severe polemic about very fundamental issues of class struggle. Why is this?

It may help to first examine what polemic is. Engels begins

the attached text with references to his opponent Mulberger, who had complained that Engels had been blunt to the point of rudeness. Engels concedes little more than sarcasm:

“I am not going to quarrel with friend Mulberger about the ‘tone’ of my criticism. When one has been so long in the movement as I have, one develops a fairly thick skin against attacks, and therefore one easily presumes also the existence of the same in others. In order to compensate Mulberger I shall try this time to bring my ‘tone’ into the right relation to the sensitiveness of his epidermis.”

But later, admitting that he had misrepresented Mulberger on a particular (quite small) point, Engels lambastes himself as “irresponsible”.

“This time Mulberger is really right. I overlooked the passage in question. It was irresponsible of me to overlook it...”

The rules of polemic are roughly these: It is done in writing. It is always against another named individual’s writing. It is direct and frank and pays little regard to bourgeois squeamishness; on the other hand, it pays the utmost respect to the meaning of the opponent’s words. Opponents in polemic never misrepresent each other. Everything is permissible, except misrepresentation.

Development is class struggle

After his remarks about “Mulberger”, Engels goes straight into a long paragraph (the second half of page 1, going over to page 2) that contains a summary of theory and practice, vanguard and mass, from the 1840s up until his point of writing, just one year after the fall of the Paris Commune. The paragraph mentions “the necessity of the political action of the proletariat and of the **dictatorship of the proletariat** as the transitional stage to the abolition of classes and with them of the state.”

This is the Communist Manifesto all over again. So, we can ask, why does Engels “go to town” to this extent? Is this not merely “housing” we are talking about? Is not housing something that everybody needs? Classless, surely? A win-win situation? Motherhood and apple-pie?

Engels says: NO! Engels says: the class struggle is here.

What we can read in Mulberger, through Engels’ eyes, is the petty-bourgeois (and full bourgeois) greed for this Housing Question as a means, or a tool, for reproducing petty-bourgeois consciousness, and this is just exactly how the post-1994 South African Government started dealing with the housing question. Yes, there should be lots of houses, it said in effect, but they must be petty-bourgeois-style houses, both in physical type, and in form of ownership.



The argument about housing is an argument about the reproduction of capitalism. It is an argument about the continuation of the ascendancy of bourgeois values over those of the working-class. For the bourgeoisie, the creation of a dwelling is an opportunity to invest that house with peasant-like values of individuality, and with petty-bourgeois ideas of “entrepreneurship”, and to regulate and control the people, according to these values.

Everything that happened in “housing” in South Africa post-1994 is pre-figured in the banal prescriptions of Mulberger that Engels lambastes. Any critique of housing in South Africa will inevitably have to follow the example of Engels if it is to be of any use. Please, comrades, read the first pages and the last paragraphs of this document, if you cannot read all of it.

As the **Communist Manifesto** says, the history of all hitherto-existing societies has been a history of class

struggle. The coming “development” period of South African history will also be a period of class struggle. We may not necessarily win every specific struggle. But what this text of Engels says is: let us never fool ourselves. Win or lose, we are in a class struggle, and there is no neutral ground, least of all on the question of housing and land development. There is much more to be studied here, but the key is political.

Please read the attached text.

[Pictures: **Shack**, Abahlali BaseMjondolo; **RDP House**, David Goldblatt (“Miriam Mazibuko watering the garden of her new RDP house, Extension 8, Far East Bank, Alexandra Township, Johannesburg, 12 September 2006. It has one room. For lack of space, her four children live with her parents-in-law.”)]

- The above serves to introduce the original reading-text: [The Housing Question, 1872, Part Three, Frederick Engels](#).
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